Port Leon

The old Port Leon town site was chosen for the first refuge headquarters pictured above. There were few interior roads at that time and most patrolling was done from a boat kept at docks built near where the old Port Leon docks had been. The Civilian Conservation Corps constructed an office, dwellings, and various outbuildings which have long since disappeared. *Refuge files*

The St. Marks Refuge Association, Inc., with a matching grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, produced the signs and brochures for the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge.

The association is a 501(c)(3) organization that supports educational, environmental, and biological programs of St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge. Visit www.stmarksrefuge.org for more information.

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Free-blown glass bottle found at the Port Leon Town Site - *Courtesy Florida Division of Historical Resources, Bureau of Archeological Research.*

The years prior to Florida becoming a state on March 3, 1845, saw several towns – Rock Haven, St. Marks, Magnolia, Port Leon, and New Port – rise and fall along the St. Marks River. Each strove to gain an economic advantage over each other. Thousands of cotton bales from south Georgia and north Florida were shipped from these ports.

Port Leon, created in 1837, was located on the east side of the St. Marks River, about two miles below the confluence of the Wakulla and St. Marks Rivers and downstream from St. Marks and Magnolia. Mule-drawn rail cars moved goods between Tallahassee and St. Marks over a railroad completed in 1836. A drawbridge built in 1839 over the St. Marks River near the old Spanish Fort extended the line to Port Leon.

Lots began selling in 1838, with advertisements declaring Port Leon to be "…handsomely located on the most elevated site on the bay…beyond the influence of the highest tides." That statement proved to be devastatingly inaccurate.

This sign mounted on an oak a short distance on the Mound Trail indicates the high water mark of the 1843 flood that destroyed Port Leon.
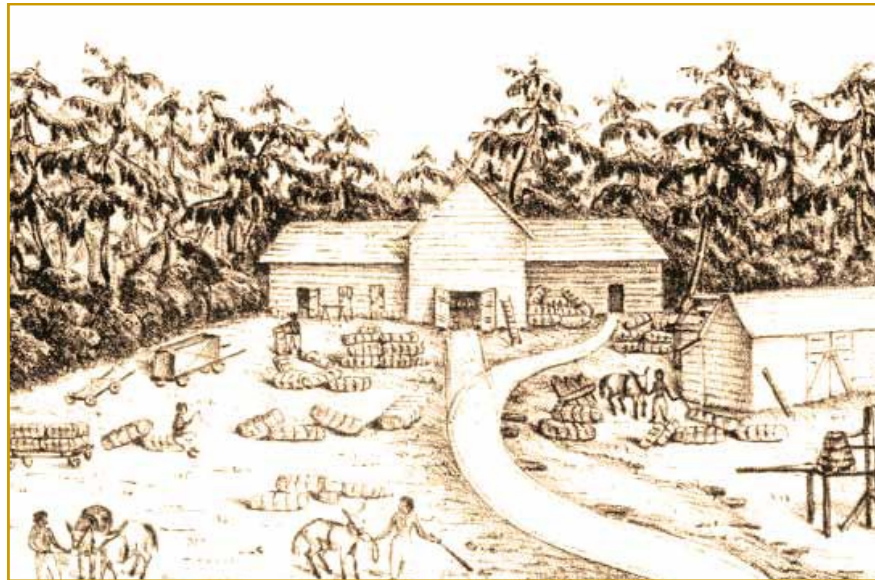
Drawing by Francis Count de Castelnau shows the Tallahassee Railroad's depot. Thousands of cotton bales were shipped from this depot to Port Leon and St. Marks. *Florida Archives*

Port Leon was incorporated in 1841 and named the county seat when Wakulla County was formed on March 11, 1843. About 200 citizens were served by a hotel, two taverns, general stores, a newspaper, the post office, and warehouses. Within a few years, the population increased to nearly 450.

A steamboat passenger from Key West brought yellow fever to Port Leon in 1841. During the three-month epidemic, the population dropped to less than 200. Although many residents left, 139 of those who stayed died due to unsanitary conditions and the lack of medical care. Most were buried in Port Leon cemetery, located south of Port Leon Creek. No sign of the cemetery remains.

Strong winds from an approaching hurricane came on the morning of September 13, 1843. An afternoon lull eased residents' fears, but by midnight, rising water flooded the town. A 10-foot tidal surge destroyed every dwelling and pushed the railroad bridge upriver. Miraculously, only one person was killed although thirteen people died at the lighthouse.

St. Marks suffered similar damage. Port Leon's citizens voted to move to higher land about four miles north of St. Marks near a sulphur spring. Once a promising town, abandoned in less than a decade after sickness and storm, nothing remains of Port Leon but the dreams of riches from the sea trade.

The 3.5-mile road to the Port Leon town site begins at the honor pay station near the St. Marks National Wildlife Visitor Center.

Terrible Storm in Florida—Total Destruction of a Town—Fourteen Lives Lost

Headline from the *New York Herald*, September 28, 1843